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Galen's "Advice for an
Epileptic Boy." 1934

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GALEN'S "ADVICE FOR AN EPILEPTIC BOY"

Signed 24 Jan. 1936

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY OWSEI TEMKIN

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GALEN'S "ADVICE FOR AN EPILEPTIC BOY"

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The "Advice for an Epileptic Boy" was, according to Ilberg, a letter written by Galen not earlier than 190 A.D.,¹ a work, therefore, of the latter part of his life. We know no details about Caecilianus, the father of the sick boy, to whom the letter is addressed nor about Dionysius, the physician, mentioned in it. Since it serves practical purposes only, Galen's theoretical views on epilepsy are not explained, although to a large extent they form the scientific basis of his prescriptions. It may, however, be sufficient here to indicate that, according to Galen, epilepsy has its cause in the brain. When a thick phlegmatic humour assembles in its cavities, affecting the roots of the nerves and preventing the free passage of the psychic pneuma (an air-like substance supposed to effect the higher functions of the body), the phenomena of epilepsy follow. The disease may either have its origin in the brain directly or the latter may be affected from the stomach or any part of the body.²

Apart from the older Latin translations, a German³ and an Italian⁴ translation have been published in this century. This, together with the fact that the text of the Kuehn edition which I have followed⁵ is far from satisfactory, made me doubtful about the value of my enterprise. But the renewed interest in the dietetic treatment of epilepsy may perhaps justify this attempt, since to the best of my knowledge the little work has never been translated into English.

¹ Cf. J. Ilberg, Ueber die Schriftstellerei des Klaudios Galenos III (Rheinisches Museum 51, 1896, p. 183/184).

² Cf. Galen, De locis affectis III, Chapters 9-11. Cf. also A. J. Brock, Greek Medicine, London and Toronto, 1929, p. 220-225; and von Storch, An Essay on the History of Epilepsy. Annals of Medical History, New Series, Vol. II, 1930, pp. 614-650.

³ F. Heller, Ueber Pathologie und Therapie der Epilepsie im Altertum, Janus, 16, 1911, p. 589-605.

⁴ Augusto Botto-Micca, Il "De puero epileptico" di Galeno. Rivista di Storia delle Scienze Mediche e Naturali. Anno 21, Vol. 12, 1930, p. 149-169.

⁵ Claudii Galeni opera omnia. ed. C. G. Kühn, Vol. XI (Lipsiae 1826) p. 357-378. I wish here to express my gratitude to Dr. Edelstein who gave me valuable advice and to my wife, Mrs. C. L. Temkin who corrected my English.

Dear Caecilianus,

I thought you would not need our advice for your boy's disease. Dionysius has already seen him and is about to sail back to Athens together with you. He is competent to do what is necessary while he is present, and to give new instructions according to the condition of the disease, when he leaves. I, however, who have never seen the boy might perhaps err very much since I was not acquainted with his original nature, and do not know how it has been affected by the disease. All I heard from you is that he suffers from epileptic paroxysms.

Now you probably think that negligence rather than the desire for truth makes me evade writing, a thing of which I have never yet been guilty. So, to please you, I am going to write down some advice on the treatment of an epileptic boy. The layman will, of course, inevitably misunderstand the meaning and blunder as to the due measure or the right time of application, for we have shown in other writings that it is not possible, without a thorough study of the therapeutic method, to cure any of the smallest diseases, let alone such great ones as epilepsy. Dionysius has already communicated with me and together we considered the whole treatment of the boy, before you urged the writing of these instructions. I easily explained my opinion to him, for he is able to follow what one says without misunderstanding anything, since he is sufficiently trained in the therapeutic method.

But I do not know how to go through the subject with you. For while that which is exact in it requires much elaboration and is too obscure for a layman, that which is concise and clear is, on the other hand, not exact. Thus I hesitated to write the instructions, much as I wished to please you. It seemed to me that I should suffer something similar to what Phidias would have suffered if, after creating the statue of Athene, he had been compelled to create a finger, an arm, a foot, the nose, an ear, and each of the other parts all separately. For I think, like a statue, the "therapeutic method"⁶ has been created by me in several books, not, however, in a manner likely to help the layman or even the ordinary physician.

Since you, however, compel me to take one part of the medical art as

⁶ Galen is obviously referring to the fourteen books of his *θεραπευτικὴ μέθοδος* a systematic book on therapeutics. Cf. also Ilberg, l.c.

my subject, separated from the harmonious union with the rest, I yield in obedience to the compulsion and write such instructions, as will be sufficient for you. For they suffice to prevent a layman, especially one who has in the usual way learned to be conversant with such writings, from making grave and irreparable mistakes in what the physicians prescribe. For physicians the treatise on the "therapeutic method" has been written; for you, however, and for the others who have a knowledge of some rational arts but are laymen in medicine, some advantage may nevertheless accrue, as I believe, from the present writing.

II

I shall try to go through as clearly as possible the manner of life by which the boy may benefit not a little and may suffer least harm from unexpected daily occurrences. These one must avoid as far as possible. Sometimes, however, he will necessarily encounter frost and violent heat, strong winds and strenuous baths, repulsive food and whirling wheels, lightning and thunder, sleeplessness and indigestion, distress and anger and weariness and similar things of which the chief characteristic is that they stir up and trouble the body violently, remind it of the disease, and produce a paroxysm. It is necessary to avoid these carefully, and if ever they occur and a paroxysm follows, then the boy must abstain completely from any motion, he must stay at home, and be put on a very light diet until the body throws off the fatigue resulting from the attack. I think you know what light diet is, and in any case, you will hear something about it if you read through the following. For now it is time for me to begin the prescriptions.

III

My instructions are to purge the boy moderately when spring approaches, for thus one may succeed in moving diseases caused by obstructions. Dionysius, who will be present, may take charge of it and regulate it. He knows exactly how to prepare the body for the purgation and what drug to use, and when; and he has already discussed the question with me. Thus in Athens you will have Dionysius present in the flesh and, together with him, my spirit and opinion

too. But after the purgation, when Dionysius has gone and the boy stays behind in Athens, you must put him on the following regimen:—

On rising from bed at daybreak, he should walk about in moderation and not very strenuously before joining his teachers. From then until it is time for the palaestra,⁷ he should devote himself to his accustomed studies. As soon as he is released from them, he should walk again, making his way to the master of exercises. This man, of all the people who take care of the boy, has to be very thoughtful. It is, however, not very easy to find such a man, since he must be chosen from amongst those who are quite uneducated and whose souls are as donkey-like and stout as their bodies. Now do not pass this over lightly and do not entrust the boy to the first person you meet! You must have in mind that the main point of the treatment consists in these two things: the use of the drug I have given to you,⁸ and the exercises. All other things are a kind of preparation for these. But Dionysius may help you in the choice of the master of exercises.

As regards the number of the exercises, the master must bear in mind to stop the boy before he becomes exhausted and, on the other hand, to make the whole body warm and adequately to rid it of superfluous substances.⁹ But both demands should be fulfilled at the same time. For the moment that adequate excretion of the superfluous material has taken place the body has become sufficiently warm, and if at this moment the exercises are discontinued, one is just in time to prevent exhaustion. But exercises beyond this point affect the solid parts and melt down their shape; and the molten matter is collected chiefly in the joints and muscles. From this there follows impairment of the strength and thereupon a feeling of soreness when one endeavours to move any limb; this condition is fatigue. Therefore, the master of exercises must be not only prudent, but also well versed in moderate exercises. He must neither stop the exercises earlier than necessary

⁷ The place where gymnastics and sports were practised.

⁸ Galen refers to the drug made from squills, the preparation of which is described in the last paragraph.

⁹ p. 362: *κενώσαι*. This is based on the conception that superfluous materials (*τὸ περιττόν* or *τὰ περιττώματα*) engendered by food, indigestion, etc. play a part in the origin of diseases and ought, therefore, to be driven out.

for fear of the following weariness, nor must he drive the boy to fatigue in the desire to warm the body and to rid it completely of all the superfluous material. These are the chief points as regards the right number of exercises.

As to their character, one must try to strengthen all members and particularly the head and the stomach, and of the latter especially the parts around the cardia.¹⁰ Now I shall tell you how one may attain this end. First, since strenuous exercises make the head full, I prescribe abstinence from them. Second, if ever it were necessary to use them, the lower parts should be moved, in particular the legs, the head being raised straight up. Third, in these exercises the master should begin with small, slow movements and thus lead up to more violent and quicker ones. It is extremely noxious not for weak bodies only, but for strong ones too, immediately to enter upon vehement exercises.

Believe me, too, rubbing is as good as exercise, especially for weaker bodies; and often the other drills are no longer necessary, if this alone has been administered properly. At first one must impart to the body a red appearance by rubbing downwards gently with muslin. One starts with the arms and hands, proceeds in the same way to the chest and abdomen, and then rubs the legs a little more in order to draw something from the upper parts of the body in this direction. Finally, one will attack the head, but it is dangerous to do so right at the beginning. For when the body is still full, the superfluous material is drawn to the part which is warmed first. Thus, as I have just said, the head must be rubbed last of all, when one does not use oil. But when one uses oil, there is no reason why one should not rub the head together with the other parts; so that one man may rub the head, two others the chest and the abdomen, and two others the legs. This method of rubbing all parts together should also be applied after the exercises and then especially, for thus the body sinks more quickly into repose and cools down less. If you pay attention to anything at all, you must do so to this.

It is usually better not to bathe and not to leave the palaestra immediately after the exercises. Rather, when breathing has become

¹⁰ verbally: the mouth of the stomach.

calm and regular and when the excitement from the exercises has completely abated, one should rub the head energetically with the muslin and often even use the comb.

IV

After this the boy should go to lunch. Beforehand he should take something that evacuates the stomach; then he may eat some vegetables, or salted fish, or barley-gruel, or olives, together with a third of his daily ration of bread, laying aside the two other parts with the more substantial food for dinner. I shall tell you later on which the heavier dishes are, when I have first gone through all those one may take without harm.

As regards vegetables, I do not prescribe the avoidance of lettuce, or mallow, or orach, or blite altogether; but one should not always take the same, but rather eat moderately now of one, now of another. Beets and cabbage belong to the same category, for of these too one must partake moderately. It is wholesome to take a little leek and parsley and smyrnion¹¹ from time to time, and of tree-fruits those which are not entirely rough in nature and hard to digest. For such foods keep back their own superfluous materials as well as those of the other dishes. Black mulberries and the so-called "praecoccia"¹² and figs, and whatever is similar to these, pass through without causing harm; the so-called gourd is not inferior to any of the mildest vegetables, and the same is true of the melons too, whereas unripe cucumber is bad.

From time to time one must also allow the boy to take a bunch of ripe grapes, whereas he should seldom be given apples and pears and then very little, and they must have ripened well not only on the tree, but at home too after gathering. For, concerning tree-fruits suitable for storage, one ought to know that fresh ones are quite different from

¹¹ According to J. Berendes, *Des Pedanios Dioskurides aus Anazarbos Arzneimittellehre in fünf Büchern*, Stuttgart 1902, p. 308 the *σμυρνιον* is *Smyrnum perfoliatum* L. It is not always possible to identify the plants given by Galen with absolute certainty.

¹² p. 366: τὰ πραικόκκια καλούμενα. Heller, l.c. p. 600 interprets them as "frühreife Gewächse," I think rightly. It is probably a Greek rendering of the Latin "praecocia" derived from *praecox*.

old ones. Now one can store apples and pears and most tree-fruits, the so-called Damascus plums, and dried figs. Dates belong to the same category; I do not exclude them completely but they must be taken at the right time and in moderation.

Speaking generally, I recommend abstinence from daily or immoderate use of such food as engenders unhealthy humours, or as causes constipation or flatulence and is hard to digest. Such food, if taken constantly or more than is advisable at a time, usually causes harm not in this disease only but in all other diseases too.

Thus far the dietetic remarks would be equally valid for many other diseases; it is, however, peculiar and special to this disease that one must chiefly beware of food which engenders phlegmatic humours. Therefore, it is not good to partake habitually of things which, although harmless otherwise, have a viscous or cold or thick juice, such as orach, blite and mallow, and although I do not exclude them, I do not wish them to be eaten always. Gourds belong to the same category and cucumber, apples and pears even more so, and finally the so-called mushrooms, the worst of all foods with a phlegmatic, thick and viscous juice. From these I advise complete abstinence, just as from turnips and all other things with an edible root. For they have a thick juice and are on the whole hard to digest, except if they contain something sharp and warm, like parsnips and radish. The boy may taste radish from time to time, but he should try to abstain from parsnips and especially from turnips. He may have plenty of such food as contains something sharp and pungent, and which does not obviously engender bad humours nor has a smell which might affect the head. Those things, however, which by their heat make the head full, such as wine, mustard, parsley, parsnips, onions and smyrnion, belong to this class of exceptions. They overheat and engender unwholesome humours. Mustard, although very apt to separate the humours, must be avoided since it affects the head.

The boy should take vinegar-honey¹³ with all confidence, even every day if he wants it. Capers can be taken with it and some salted fish, adding a little olive oil of course, as much as is necessary to make the dish pleasant. This dish is a kind of remedy for the disease, partic-

¹³ The preparation is described in the last paragraph.

ularly if the vinegar has been prepared with squills, in which case people usually call it "scilleticon." Above all, I want him to take one of these two things each day, I mean to say, caper or salted fish with vinegar-honey. If, however, the boy also wants to drink vinegar-honey, it should be prepared beforehand (you will soon read how it has to be prepared) and not be mixed on the spur of the moment from the unmellowed ingredients. And it must be mixed with plenty of water, for in this way it becomes more pleasant. In winter it must be taken warm; in summer, however, nothing stands in the way of often using it cold, if the heat is excessive, the thirst great, and if the person is not entirely unaccustomed to cold beverages. For besides everything else, vinegar-honey, if not too sweet, quenches the thirst very well, and even better if it is mixed with cold water. To complete the cure of an epileptic boy, after the first purgation, it often sufficed if I prescribed the vinegar-honey and the use of the drug, without altering anything else in his old manner of life. But since I am not familiar with your son's constitution and am not going to take charge of him personally, and since I do not know how bad the disease is, I cannot predict how few remedies he may need and it seems better to me to discuss them all.

Thus, as I have said, after the exercises he should partake at lunch of vinegar-honey and eat some vegetables, olives, nuts, figs and dried figs—but not all of them together every day. He should rather take one simple dish; but I mention all of them, so that the diet may be varied. At this time, as has been said, the boy may also partake of the other tree-fruits, if he craves them. But otherwise it would be better to abstain from them, not only for the sake of curing the disease, but also in consideration of the whole state of health, as you see us too abstaining strictly from all seasonable food. But, it is true, we do not write about a healthy regimen for philosophers, as I should like best to do, nor, on the other hand, do we write merely for the cure of the disease, but also concerning the whole life of your boy. Now one must permit him to eat openly and at the right time things which do not cause great harm, lest he be harmed more by taking them secretly and at the wrong time. For people who are prevented from doing so openly, fill themselves with what they desire all at once and in a larger quantity. I prefer to concede to children many such foods as, although not beneficial, do not do much harm if eaten openly and at the

right time and with the necessary moderation, lest at the wrong time they might be compelled by the vehement desire to eat more and greedily. This should be the arrangement regarding the food.

V

After this the boy should have a short intermission and then I want him to walk about leisurely before resuming his studies. And after being released from these, I should like him to walk about again before dinner. Then he should eat the two parts of bread which were left, and of the other things according to the instructions. He may eat the meat of almost all birds except water-fowl. Above all, he must abstain from eating quadrupeds, but if at some time it be necessary to partake of them, he may eat the stomach of the domestic pig and such parts as are not fleshy, while of the wild pig he may eat the fleshy parts too. He may also have a taste of kid and hare. All these should be prepared simply or roasted without fat; "simply" means by way of water seasoned with dill, leek, oil and salt. You have seen at my house the earthen vessel in which to roast meat well without fat.

As regards sea-food, oysters are all bad; among fish, those living near the rocks are the best of all, but it will also be necessary to partake of those living in the open sea. The ray is almost the only cartilaginous fish which is suitable.¹⁴ Among the plants with hulls,¹⁵ husked barley stands first, lentils, wheat-groats and peas come next, while the others are bad. Generally speaking one must beware, as has been said before, of everything which causes viscous and thick humours, and flatulence and engenders superfluous substances and is

¹⁴ p. 373: ἡ νάρκη δὲ μόνη σχεδὸν τι τῶν μαλακίων ἐπιτήδειος. Dr. Edelstein was good enough to compare this passage with two manuscripts of the writing preserved in Rome. Although they confirm the reading given by Kühn, I have translated "cartilaginous fish" instead of τῶν μαλακίων. The Latin translation also renders this sentence as: Ex cartilagineo autem torpedo fere sola convenit. Aristotle (Hist. animal, 540b) numbers the ray amongst the selachia. A passage with Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae VII (314 d) proves that the ray was actually eaten in antiquity.

¹⁵ p. 373: ὀσπρίων δὲ πτισάνη etc. ὀσπρία means leguminous plants, but since barley does not belong to them, Galen seems to have used the term in a broader sense different from that given by Theophrastus, Hist. plant. 8, I.

hard to digest. Oysters, cartilaginous fish, bulbous roots, snails, cheese, mushrooms, beef and boiled eggs are hard to digest and thicken the humours of those who eat them. Wheat-groats and pork engender good but viscous blood. All water-fowl, however, engender superfluous substances, while plants with hulls, especially beans and chick-peas, cause flatulence. Husked barley too, if not boiled diligently, causes flatulence, so that one must either boil it or not use it. If lentils are well boiled, the whole flatulent element is thrown off—but it is not good to take too much of them, since they engender a thick humour. These instructions are sufficient for the daily diet.

VI

After the purgation which I ordered to take place at the beginning of the spring, your son should use the drug prepared from squills which I gave to you. He should use it every day before leaving for the palaestra, and if the disease is not very severe and hardened, it may be hoped that it will cede completely in forty days through this drug; indeed I have cured innumerable children in this way without having to use hellebore. But it is necessary to drink wormwood once or twice after the purgation and before using the drug.

The sharpest vinegar-honey contains one part of vinegar to four of honey and the sweetest, one part to eight. The intervening degrees are determined in sharpness or sweetness by their proximity to one of the two extremes. But it must be boiled thoroughly, for thus both ingredients are properly united: the pungency of the vinegar is refined and the flatulent power in the honey is checked. The person who boils it must remove the foam completely. I know that in Greece and in most of the islands vinegar-honey is also prepared from honeycomb, and you may confidently use this kind too, especially in summer when the boy resides in Athens. However, it is not my business to determine at what time one ought to give it sweeter or sharper, with more or less water, and many other details. This rather is the concern of the man who is present and who sees the body under treatment, and is able to judge the condition of the humours. For with thick and viscous humours, one must use the vinegar-honey sharper and less mingled with water; otherwise, one must use it with more water and sweeter. In the same way, it is necessary to change and vary every-

thing else which has been mentioned, according to the daily condition of the body, as in all other diseases too. Wherefore, even if one wrote innumerable prescriptions for a man who is not exercised in the therapeutic method and hence skillful, one would not make him a capable physician, not even for one of the smallest diseases, let alone of the greatest! I have often shown this clearly by healing chronic ulcers and diseases of the eye with the same drugs as physicians had used before without success. According to Hippocrates, when the quantity of each drug has been determined according to its potency, the rest of the cure consists in its administration at the right time. And, as all the best physicians have agreed, the drugs are rather the means of assistance than assistance itself. Thus I finish the subject where I began it: the layman cannot handle the least thing well but needs the supervision of the expert.

Since, however, most people extract the juice of the squill badly, and since you wish to learn how I do it, I am going to add to this work the manner of its preparation. I take the honey vessel, as the Greeks call them, from which the honey has been emptied and I put in squills after having rubbed them into fine pieces between my hands. I cover it with a close-fitting lid and put a skin around the whole body of the vessel, fastening it carefully. Then I put it in a place facing the south and sheltered from the north winds, so that they cannot blow upon it. I do this at the time of the year believed by all Greeks to be the season of the rising of the dog-star. This season has forty days; twenty before the rising itself and the same number of days afterwards. During this period I sometimes gently change the position of the pot in order to get it warm on each side alike. At the end of this time, I unfasten it and then I find that the body of the squills looks as though it had been boiled in the vessel and some of the juice has come out. I take out the juice and sweetening it with the best honey, I administer one spoonful of it daily; a small one to children and a large one to adults. I also cut the body of the whole squills fine and, levigating it with honey, I give a spoonful of this too in the manner described. You must know that its potency is second to that of the above-mentioned juice. But those who boil the squills in water make them lose their potency, while those who prepare them with vinegar make the drug very strong but not harmless for the nerves.

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